

VZCZCXYZ0010
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSJ #0653 0941225
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 041225Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7702
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SAN JOSE 000653

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EINVECONSENVCSJA](#)

SUBJECT: COSTA RICA NOT PARADISE-RAW SEWAGE EVERYWHERE

¶1. This is the first in an occasional series of cables explaining why Costa Rica is not paradise. These cables seek to paint a realistic picture of the day-to-day challenges faced by Costa Rica. Travel brochures don't tell the entire story.

¶2. Summary. Costa Rica treats less than 3% of human waste, dumping 97% of its sewage into the nation's rivers that drain to the sea, making the rivers little more than contaminated open drainage ditches. Despite this shocking lack of modern infrastructure in a nation that takes great pride in its environmental reputation, lawmakers vacillated for months before finally accepting a Japanese loan for major sewage treatment projects. End Summary.

LEGISLATURE FINALLY ACCEPTS LOAN FOR SEWAGE PROJECTS

¶3. After months of vacillating and missed deadlines, Costa Rican lawmakers gave final approval in November 2006 to Law No. 8559 approving acceptance of a US\$127 million loan from the government of Japan for sewage treatment projects. The loan will finance part an overall project estimated at US\$557 million to replace the decrepit sewage collection system in the San Jose metropolitan area and to build a sewage treatment plant. According to the local water and sewer authority's manager, the current sewer system covers less than 45% of the metropolitan area population. Nationwide, only 25% of the population is served by sewers. Inadequate treatment plants mean that even when wastes are collected they are not treated. Many commercial and industrial areas are not served by either the sewer system or septic tanks, dumping wastes directly into the nation's rivers.

RAW SEWAGE DUMPED INTO THE SEA

¶4. Nationwide, Costa Rica currently treats only 2.6% of human waste generated, ranking Costa Rica amongst the five worst countries in Latin America. And the country is falling backward. The 2.6% figure was revised down from 4% after the current Minister of Environment challenged the inclusion of non-operative treatment systems in the estimate.) The Central Valley area, which includes greater metropolitan San Jose and nearly two million people, has an antiquated sewage collection system with many underground lines dating from mid-century that have rusted through. In some areas sewage can be seen leaking into the streets. Despite the fact that at least 100 new residential subdivisions have been added to the network, there has been no extensive work on the Central Valley sewer system since 1981.

¶5. Nearly all waste enters the rivers that flow through San Jose and drain into the Pacific Ocean at the Gulf of Nicoya via the Rio Grande de Tarcoles. Local residents know they should avoid beaches in that area due to the "black waters". Contamination has damaged mangrove forests and coral reefs and is suspected of causing reduced fish catches. Water contamination is also linked to hepatitis,

cholera, skin problems and cases of diarrhea increased 16% in Costa Rica from 2002 to 2005.

¶6. In addition to the Japanese loan, experts estimate that Costa Rica will need an additional US\$430 million to complete the entire project. The Japanese loan will be applied to the first phase of the project estimated to cost \$230 million. Costa Rica's share of the first phase will be raised by increasing water and sewer rates. The project is expected to greatly improve the quality of the receiving waters in the Rivera, Torres, Maria Aguilar, Tiribi and Tarcoles Rivers.

¶7. Comment: While famous for its investment in "green" issues such as national parks and biodiversity protection, Costa Rica does not walk the talk when it comes to "brown" environmental issues such as sewage treatment. For a tourism-dependent country that relies upon its reputation as an environmental paradise and prime ecotourism destination, the nation's use of its rivers in lieu of a modern sanitation system, as the conduit for dumping raw untreated waste onto its most convenient beaches and important fishing areas is a shocking revelation. The poor state of the sewage system creates particular hazards for agricultural areas downstream of major cities, where sewage-borne disease like cholera could frighten away customers. The lack of fundamental sewage treatment infrastructure is further evidence that Costa Rica's modernization and development is fragile. End Comment.

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